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At the Movies

Dark Crystal

By Kathleen Winter

There's something awesome about Jim Henson's brand of creativity; his move from muppeteer to to myth-maker has a taint not of artistic development but of Darwinian evolution. His new feature film, *Dark Crystal*, looks like other kinds of work. It looks like animation; the characters are physically created by the artist. It's only on inspection Henson's Gelflings (small elfin creatures) and monsters make themselves apparent as something new. Henson hasn't sketched characters, he hasn't hired actors; these are three-dimensional creatures that appear to live and breathe. I wonder if forget-me-nots are sprouting on Mary Shelley's grave.

Dark Crystal tells the story of a prophecy fulfilled. Power has fallen into the talons of hideous creatures with reptilian bodies and vulture heads. Only the fulfilment of the stone-inscribed prophecy (the dark crystal must be speared with a white crystal shard by Gelfling hand) can restore power to the good white wizards who have grown old and weary. This is the entire storyline — *Dark Crystal* never goes into the nature of the good and evil powers. They are black and white, dark and light, literally. It's a bit like *Star Trek*. Questions about what kind of values lie behind the antagonists are not answered — because they aren't asked.

Taken on its own level the story can be entertaining. Henson's new creatures have detail the Muppets never had. The boy and girl gelfling have beautiful slender arms and hands, and unlike Kermit they've got eminently visible feet. They can row boats and play flutes and dance and climb hills with all parts of their bodies visible. But there is a sad lack of the heart that went into the making of Miss Piggy et al. Gelflings will never be on the cover of *People Magazine* or in the year's list of the top ten best dressed women. Physically Henson's new creatures outclass the Muppets. His *Dark Crystal* sets are more than backdrops; they too are alive — the roots of trees move like hands, the hills have mouths. The walls really do have ears. *Dark Crystal* is a master-work in technical terms.

The trouble is the story and char-

acters are overshadowed by this mammoth attempt to create a technically outstanding film. While the creatures' appearance is new and startling, their movement is often pained and lumbering. Abandoning the Muppets' simplicity has meant turning away too from their delightful speed and mobility.

Dark Crystal suffers the same



Jim Henson's magic touch with the Muppets helps him create a race of Gelflings that are beautiful to look at.

problem faced by *The Muppets' Movie*; when taken from the short skit format and put on feature-length reels, the Muppets' momentum flags. The imposition of continuity squashes a certain spark; the effect is no longer lively.

In spite of this *Dark Crystal* has a few memorable characters. Aughra, the feisty old woman who prods Gelfling Jen to do his duty to the prophecy, comes closest to the well-rounded personalities we enjoy among The Muppets. She's well developed (meant ambiguously) and has some good lines. Good too are the clansmen who raised the girl Gelfling; we see them bopping to balalaikas in a scene that looks unmistakably like a caricature of a Ukrainian folk festival. The wise old wizards who raised Jen haven't much to say; we see them lining the horizon in their laboured trek to the crystal castle at scattered points through the film, and we find out very little about them. Nevertheless we are able to imagine, from their kind old faces, that they are wise, slow and benevolent. Henson's puppet-making skills don't go astray in *Dark Crystal*, it's just that his creations are limited too much to appearances. Perhaps in the sequel — there will be a sequel — the muppeteer/myth-maker will be able to focus more on his characters' insides. ▲

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